

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1239

INFO PANCANAL

USCINCSO

C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 2177

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PN

SUBJECT: STUDENT UNREST

SUMMARY: SCHOOL OPENED FOR MOST PANAMANIAN STUDENTS TODAY, AND THE PAPERS ARE FULL OF THE RITUAL EDITORIALS, OFFICIAL EXHORTATIONS AND FRONT-PAGE NEWS STORIES -- ALL EVOKING THE QUIET VIRTUES OF STUDIOUSNESS. BUT BEHIND THESE ANODYNE COLUMNS LIES A WIDESPREAD EXPECTATION THAT STUDENTS MAY SET OFF ANOTHER SPASM OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY BEFORE SO VERY LONG. THE EMBASSY SHARES THE GENERAL BELIEF THAT THERE WILL PROBABLY BE ANTI-GOVERNMENT AGITATION BY STUDENTS THIS SPRING. THE FOCUS OF STUDENT COMPLAINT IS THE GOVERNMENT: ALLEGED MISMANAGEMENT OF THE ECONOMY, IMPOSITION OF NEW TAXES, PRO-BUSINESS CHANGES IN THE LABOR CODE, CORRUPTION, ETC. IF THE EXPECTED AGITATION OR DEMONSTRATIONS OCCUR, THE NATIONAL GUARD (GN) WILL PROBABLY SUPPRESS THEM IN A NO-NONSENSE FASHION. END SUMMARY.

1. FOR THE NEARLY HALF MILLION PRIMARY AND SECONDARY STUDENTS IN PANAMA, SCHOOL OPENS MARCH 28. FOR THE 30,000 STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF PANAMA (UP)
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AND THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY (USMA) IT BEGINS APRIL 4, ALTHOUGH CLASSES WILL IN PRACTICE COMMENCE ON EASTER MONDAY, APRIL 11.

2. THERE IS AMONG PANAMA'S POLITICALLY LITERATE POPULATION A VIRTUALLY UNANIMOUS EXPECTATION THAT TROUBLE IS BREWING AMONG STUDENTS. THIS EXPECTATION,

WHICH MAY HAVE SOME OF THE QUALITIES OF A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY, EXTENDS FROM HIGH OFFICIALS TO THE MAN IN THE STREET. THE PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT HAS ALREADY TAKEN SEVERAL ACTIONS. THESE HAVE INCLUDED INCREASED GN SURVEILLANCE OF STUDENT ACTIVISTS (E.G., ARREST OF GUAYKUCHO MEMBERS ON JANUARY 16) AND MEETINGS SPONSORED BY THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION ON MARCH 23 AND 24 FOR HIGH SCHOOL POLITICOS. THE PURPOSES OF THESE MEETINGS WERE TO EXPLAIN GOVERNMENT ACTIONS, CHIEFLY THE 5 PERCENT SALES TAX, AND TO ASK FOR STUDENT COMPREHENSION OF THE MEASURES. A GAUGE OF STUDENT RIVALRY AND OF POTENTIAL INTERGROUP VIOLENCE IS THAT FEP (FEDERATION OF PANAMANIAN STUDENTS) AND FER (REVOLUTIONARY STUDENT FRONT) ADHERENTS GOT SEPARATE BRIEFINGS.

3. THE MEETINGS WERE NOT A SUCCESS FOR MINISTER ROYO, ACCORDING TO A WELL-INFORMED U.S. SOURCE. THE MEETINGS OF STUDENTS FOLLOWED ON THE HEELS OF ILL-RECEIVED INDOCTRINATION SEMINARS FOR TEACHERS MARCH 14-18. IN THESE MEETINGS MANY PROFESSORS PUBLICLY EXPRESSED DISSATISFACTION WITH VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE MINISTRY'S PRESENTATION OF THE "REVOLUTIONARY" LINE. AS A RESULT OF THIS DISSATISFACTION, SOME TEACHERS MAY WELL BE UNRESPONSIVE TO MINISTRY PLEAS TO RESTRAIN THEIR PUPILS.

4. UNIVERSITY AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS ARE CONCERNED. THE UP VICE RECTOR FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS TOLD AN EMBASSY OFFICER IN JANUARY THAT HE EXPECTED A "HOT" YEAR,
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MUCH UNPLEASANTNESS, AND STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS. THE VICE DEAN OF THE ARCHITECTURE SCHOOL SAID HE HAS OBSERVED THAT ANTI-TORRIJOS GIBES AND GRAFFITI HAVE INCREASED AND ARE VERY OPENLY EXPRESSED. HE SAID HIS SCHOOL IS NOW MORE POLITICIZED AND MORE ANTI-TORRIJOS THAN IN PAST YEARS. THE VICE DEAN OF THE LAW SCHOOL, A TORRIJOS SUPPORTER, WRUNG HIS HANDS OVER PROSPECTS OF DEMONSTRATIONS IN HIS FACULTY, THE MOST TROUBLESOME OF ALL. A PROFESSOR AT THE USMA SAID HE KNEW SEVERAL STUDENTS AT THE UP WHO WERE TRANSFERRING TO THE USMA OR ENROLLING IN BOTH SCHOOLS IN THE EXPECTATION THAT THE UP MIGHT SOON BE CLOSED.

5. EMBASSY OFFICERS HAVE DISCUSSED THESE MATTERS WITH SEVERAL (RELATIVELY MODERATE) STUDENTS, AND THEY ARE UNANIMOUS IN EXPECTING PROTESTS RANGING FROM SIMPLE, THOUGH VOCAL, DEMONSTRATIONS TO ARMED CONFRONTATION WITH THE GN. THESE STUDENTS REPORT THAT ANGER HAS NOT DIED DOWN OVER THE TREATMENT WHICH

STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS RECEIVED AT THE HANDS OF THE NATIONAL GUARD (GN) LAST SEPTEMBER. THIS ANGER WAS TRANSFORMED INTO ELECTORAL GAINS FOR "RADICAL" (I.E., ANTI-FEP STUDENT GROUPS AT THE UP IN DECEMBER). PRINCIPAL AMONG THEM WERE: FER, LSR (REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST LEAGUE) AND GUAYKUCHO. STUDENT GROUPS RESPONDING TO THE COMMUNIST PARTY (PDP) ALSO DID WELL. THE GOVERNMENT-SUPPORTED FEP LOST HEAVILY. AND WHILE FEP HAS SOUGHT TO RECOUP PRESTIGE (E.G., IN LEADING A FLAG-BURNING MARCH INTO THE CANAL ZONE JANUARY 9), THERE IS NO INDICATION THAT IT HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL. FER GAINED IN INFLUENCE AND STRENGTH IN THE CITY'S SECONDARY SCHOOLS ALSO.

6. DESPITE INDICATIONS, THE EMBASSY CAN NOT CONFIDENTLY PREDICT WHAT WILL HAPPEN AT EITHER
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THE UP OR THE CITY'S SECONDARY SCHOOLS. BUT THERE IS ALREADY A MARKED ATMOSPHERE OF TENSION AND EXPECTATION OF TROUBLE. PROTESTS APPEAR PROBABLE, AND VIOLENCE POSSIBLE. IF PROTESTS GET OUT OF HAND, THERE IS EVERY INDICATION THAT THE NATIONAL GUARD WILL MOVE SWIFTLY, AND FORCEFULLY TO SUPPRESS THEM. WHILE THE PROTESTS ARE LIKELY TO FOCUS ON UNPOPULAR GOVERNMENT MEASURES AND ON THE GOVERNMENT ITSELF, WE CANNOT RULE OUT THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE TREATY NEGOTIATIONS COULD LIGHT THE SPARK IN AN ATMOSPHERE OVER-SUPPLIED WITH TINDER.

JORDEN

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Message Attributes

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